Social media giant’s new tools look to curb cyberbullying

Jordan Graham Wednesday, November 16, 2016

Twitter has rolled out a new set of tools aimed at curbing abuse and harassment on the social media site in a move that’s geared toward stopping cyberbullying.

Twitter said it would allow users to mute and not receive notifications containing specific words and phrases, giving users a better way to report hateful tweets.

“What makes Twitter great is that it’s open to everyone and every opinion. We’ve seen
a growing trend of people taking advantage of that openness and using Twitter to be abusive to others,” Twitter said in a blog post yesterday.

Twitter has developed a reputation as a website where abuse runs rampant, ranging from racist to homophobic to anti-Semitic comments. By design, Twitter allows anyone to tweet at any other user. Combined with the ability to use anonymous accounts, abuse has exploded on the site.

“About 35 percent of everything that is sent out on Twitter is uncivil in some way, shape or form,” said Jacob Groshek, a professor at Boston University, citing his research into abusive tweets. “The incivility on Twitter is a very important and pressing issue.”

While the tweets can be problematic, Twitter itself has been slow to react to reports of harassment. Frequently, users share stories and screenshots of clearly offensive tweets next to another screenshot of Twitter support saying the tweet does not violate its terms of service.

“Social media always has this balancing act. They want to promote people saying what they want to say, but at the same time they want to make sure they don’t develop a reputation,” said Elizabeth Englander, a psychology professor at Bridgewater State University who focuses on cyberbullying.

Englander said Twitter’s steps could be helpful, but even just announcing them may make a difference.

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“The fact that they’re doing it also sends a message about social values,” she said. “If they didn’t do anything, that would send a completely different message.”
Twitter has been facing significant pressure to curb abuse, including Disney reportedly walking away from a deal to acquire the company in part because of its harassment problems.

“We’re at the point where Twitter, which was the salvation of Arab spring, has now become the damnation of the American public,” said Roger Kay of Endpoint Technologies. “I don’t know how you sell that to somebody for a lot of money.”
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